

## ***The Human Face of Community-building***

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By nature, human beings group together – to cooperate in securing food and shelter, to realize increased security and safety; to enjoy the happiness of laughter and companionship. Communities form around some common factor or experience, and can be defined by location, by governance, by purpose, by interest or identity, by social or cultural climate; or some combination of such features. In a sense, anywhere a unique group of people gather to live, work, or learn together has elements of “culture” and “community.”

Many communities have haphazard origins – the people who happen to live in a certain area or to use a particular on-line service. Some communities are born as a reaction to adverse circumstances. Still others are created by individuals who choose to live together and purposefully craft a particular lifestyle. Some communities are long-lasting; others are quite temporary.

Community-building is a dynamic process performed on many levels. The work of Legacy International encompasses leadership and civil society development. While tackling these formal elements, Legacy International also addresses the human dimension of community-building -- creating a tangible sense of community among the groups of people whom we serve; giving them tools to carry back to their colleagues at home. Groups may be participants in short-term training-of-trainers programs; teams of professionals who undertake a joint project; or teenagers who attend in a training program. At times, these communities have longer life-spans, such as a class of students or the faculty at a particular school in New York, Sarajevo, or Jakarta, or a league of professionals from various cities united by their interest in addressing a particular need. Members of such communities can represent widely differing backgrounds and perspectives.

As a consequence, the human dimension of community-building is undertaken quite consciously, at times making a difference in the degree of success in an endeavor. Some of the understandings that have come through this work are presented below.

### **Principles of Productive Communities**

A strong and productive community is characterized by individual members, a social climate, and governance structures and procedures that

- affirm the inherent dignity and value of each of its members, and demonstrate genuine respect for all;

- negotiate an effective balance between individual rights and needs, and what is required for the benefit of the whole;
- strive to establish conditions of justice and equity for all members, realizing that literal equality may not fulfill these conditions;
- respect the expression of a full range of viewpoints in the process of promoting productive dialogue and common welfare;
- value diversity of culture, background, opinion, and values – identifying commonalities where they exist, allowing essential differences to be maintained, and creating a common culture that can encompass both.

Where these concepts are in practice – observably present in the majority of interactions among citizens – the social climate and culture is dynamic and productive. It has long been the interest of law-makers, educators, social scientists, conflict resolution specialists, youth development experts, cross-cultural trainers, and others to promote the expression of these higher human capacities. Each of these fields has contributed knowledge to this quest. Throughout the world today, entities ranging from universities, law enforcement departments to corporations and non-profit organizations verbalize statements of beliefs and values which describe how they wish to live and work together.

However, such “credos” are not actualized without some organized attempt to influence the attitudes and behaviors of the constituents. For example, during the early 1950s the term “contact hypothesis” was coined to describe a process of bringing diverse peoples together to become more familiar with one another, which would supposedly promote understanding and reduce prejudice. However, studies often showed an opposite result.<sup>1</sup> Public school integration in the United States frequently increased rather than decreased distrust and prejudice between blacks and whites. Children did not automatically choose, and were not encouraged, to interact with members of other ethnic groups in the school setting. Preferring those who were more like themselves, they continued for years to gather along racial and ethnic lines.<sup>2</sup>

In these social experiments, a second factor emerged. Competitive attitudes in both the classroom and social life were found to be a key factor in bringing about disharmony. Merely putting the two groups together and doing little or nothing to promote inter-group harmony made integration particularly stressful. Prejudice increased, studies reported, because “continued exposure to a person or object under unpleasant conditions ... leads to less liking.”<sup>3</sup> A similar study in Israel showed that 67 percent of Jewish high school students who had had negative contact with Arabs expressed hatred of them, whereas only 37 percent of the students who had no contact with Arabs expressed hatred.<sup>4</sup>

This is not an argument for continued segregation, but rather a plea for conscious, skilled efforts to promote integration and harmony when diverse peoples are brought together, using methods that make true peaceful co-existence possible.

### **Prerequisites for Harmony**

In subsequent decades, various researchers concluded that only when certain conditions are present will contact bring about positive changes in inter-group attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Findings were summarized by researchers such as Amir and Ben Ari, Rothbart and John, and Cook. These conditions include:

1. "Equal-status contact between the members of the interacting group ... Change may also be produced if important characteristics of the interacting minority members are different from, and more positive, than the stereotypes held by majority members ..."
2. "Inter-group cooperation in the pursuit of common goals ... [which] creates an interdependence ... and discourages competition ..."
3. "Contact of an intimate rather than casual nature, which allows the interacting members to get to know each other beyond the superficial level."
4. "An 'authority' and/or social climate approving of, and supporting, the inter-group contact."
5. "The initial inter-group attitudes are not extremely negative."<sup>6</sup>
6. A certain portion of activities promote meaningful exchange, enjoyment, and fun.<sup>7</sup>

It is a mistake, however, to assume that any given situation *automatically* presents these favorable conditions. Identifying how each factor operates in, or is lacking from, a given program, school, or work environment, and how, if it is lacking, it can be created is an excellent tool for self-evaluation.

Since the 1979 inception of the Global Youth Village, a leadership training program for teenagers, utilizing these factors has been central to Legacy International's work. This pilot program took place long before its directors had access to the studies introduced above. J. E. Rash, founder and president of Legacy International, had spent a decade in education, training parents and teachers, establishing experimental classrooms. Drawing from his studies in intercultural relations, his travels to various parts of the world, and his knowledge of the concept of a "prepared environment" (initially presented by educator Maria Montessori<sup>8</sup>), he set out to construct a global village in the United States where everyone who attends adapts to a new culture, rather than a typical American summer camp setting to which international youths would adapt to a exclusively American lifestyle and expectations.

Years of careful observation led to some conclusions. Logistical decisions played an important role: bringing together teenagers from many countries, naming the cabins in different languages, serving food from Africa, Native American reservations, Indonesia, and Spain. But these actions alone could not accomplish the entire task. Could American participants taste a similar kind of culture shock as was being experienced by the 15-year-old who stepped off a plane from Greece? Could the 16-year-old Hindu girl from India or the 17-year-old Muslim boy from Egypt avoid the adolescent peer pressure to become involved in cliques, sexual experimentation, and being obsessed with looking "cool"? And how could the program in a short time enable teenagers from various countries to gain the cross-cultural skills of empathy for the thoughts and feelings of others; patience in the face of constantly changing, unfamiliar situations; and the ability to suspend

judgment and remain open to new ideas, even those which initially do not make sense<sup>9</sup> – skills which also have great use in close teamwork and conflict resolution efforts?

Legacy staff learned to address behavior, attitudes and skills development through program content, physical logistics, instructional elements, behavior modeling, scheduling, group assignments, announcement, and every aspect of village life. Specific workshops, program activities, and training methodologies were developed to create the circumstances that promote inter-group harmony and teach these intercultural awareness and conflict resolution skills mentioned above. Later, scientific evidence was found that confirmed that this work, originally done out of pure dedication intuition, observation, and faith.

### **Evidence of Change**

Today, Global Youth Village participants come from cities, suburbs, and ghettos, from villages and islands and refugee camps around the world. Youths from more than 105 countries have come, and each one's experience is unique. A boy from an American inner city environment says he doesn't have to pick fights any more. "At home, I may still have to fight if somebody attacks me," he says, "but I know that when I have a choice, I can settle problems with communication now."

A girl from Iraq says, "I have learned that I must listen and try to understand. Just forcing my opinion on someone else will not resolve anything. We both have to give something up."

A refugee from Southeast Asia said, "I feel happy here because here I am the same as everyone else. The rich boy from the city gets out of his father's fancy car, and becomes the same as me. We are all treated equally."

Now celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Legacy conducts programs on several continents for a wide array of audiences. Legacy applies the principles and methodologies originally identified at the Global Youth Village throughout its portfolio of programs and services. Regardless of the age group or professional niche, we hear similar comments from participants and staff and see similar results. A few examples: At the completion of a program designed to provide leaders from various agencies in a highly multi-cultural part of the Washington DC. Metropolitan area with conflict mediation skills, the 30 members voluntarily organized their own professional network to support collaborative initiatives.

During the *Capacity-Building for Youth Serving Entities* in Perm, Russia, a training-of-trainers program involved 25 psychologists, teachers, and youth workers. Two days into the program, an exercise invited participants to discuss aspects of their personal identity. One woman revealed that for years she had been using an assumed name, since her true name made her subject to prejudice and ethnic discrimination. "But I feel safe enough here to tell you, and ask you all to call me by my real name." The group was happy to respond.

Another program, the *Leadership Development Initiative* program was run for the benefit of the schools of the Archdiocese of New York City. Twelve seasoned professional had been assembled from a wide range of former workplaces and ethnic backgrounds to work with as a training team with the students. At the end of the first year, one team member commented, “What I appreciate so much has been the community you created among us. We are all so different, yet we were able to respect and learn so much from each other.”

### Foundations

From Legacy’s perspective, this work is based on a core set of beliefs:

Peaceful co-existence among groups of diverse peoples is necessary for the future of global security – and it is possible. Differences of culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and values are strengths, and need to be respected and treated as such.

Action is better than reaction. Promoting awareness, facilitating cooperation, and equipping people to address social issues in a pre-emptive way before they become problems is an important investment for a secure, safe, and stable future.

There is a connecting thread underlying the values that motivate people, in addition to the many differences. By identifying and learning how to operate from this common source, people can gain the strength to understand, respect, and serve each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice* (Glenview IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1985), p. 149

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; study cited is by Stephan, 1978

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150; studies cited are by Burgess and Sales, 1971; Swap, 1977; Zajonc, Markus and Wilson, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Ben-Ari and Yehuda Amir, “Contact between Arab and Jewish Youth in Israel: Reality and Potential,” in *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*, ed. Miles Hewstone and Rupert Brown, p. 53; study cited is by Levy and Guttman, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Weeks, Paul B. Brislin and Richard W. Pederson, *A Manual of Structured Experiences for Cross-cultural Learning* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1985), p. ii.

<sup>6</sup> Ben-Ari and Amir, p. 51; factors outlined are derived from studies by Amir, 1969 & 1976, and Cook, 1970; cf. Weeks, Brislin and Pederson, p. ii.

<sup>7</sup> This additional factor is added by Legacy International as a result of its practical work.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1967) and other works by Dr. Montessori.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Intercultural Communicating* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1981). p.1.